

Last at the Cross, First at the Tomb

John 20:1-18

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20Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' ¹⁶Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." ' ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

I like to think I'm pretty familiar with the women of the Bible. From Ruth, to Deborah, to Tamar, and even Shiphrah and Puah, I've read these stories. I know these stories. I've thought a lot about these stories. I like to think that I reference them often. And I know that the Black church has a tradition of saying women were "the last at the cross and the first at the tomb." But who were these women? When I approached this scripture on Mary Magdalene, I was surprised at how little I knew about the first person to see the resurrected Christ. For me, she's always been the "other" Mary.

In recent years it's been more "ok" to reference Mary, the mother of Jesus. I long had the impression from Protestants that Mary is someone to be looked up to,

but certainly not to be held in the same regard as say, the way Catholics beatify Mary. So in Protestant circles, the “other” Mary possibly gets an honorable mention when it comes to important women of the Bible.

What do we know about Mary Magdalene? Mary Magdalene has been painted with strokes both impressive and inaccurate. In the Middle Ages, she was labeled as a sex worker who then “sees the light” but we have long since found that to be fiction, as none of the Gospels refer to her as such. Mary is a preacher, she is the church’s first “lady of proclamation,” testifying to the risen Christ. In classic artwork, Mary Magdalene is often seen holding a red egg, which is meant to be a symbol of the resurrection. Mary is named 12 times in the 4 Gospels, which is more than some apostles. She’s referred to as someone who’s had 7 demons cast out of her, her body being the place of a miracle that Jesus performed. Mary was one of Jesus’ first “sponsors,” as the Gospel says “the women,” of which Mary was a part, were helping support “them” (the disciples) with their own means. This is huge for the time period, as many women were at the mercy, at least financially, of their family unit. But if Mary and her colleagues did have families, they left them to follow Jesus. In that way, they were no different than any other disciple. She shows up in the apocrypha and the Gnostic gospels as a disciple who was exalted above any other.

That’s quite an impressive fact list for a woman of the Bible. But the question still remains, yeah, but what did she DO?

Mary Magdalene is at the very heart of our Easter story. This past holy week we’ve maybe unintentionally traveled with Mary, trailing her journey from the excitement of palm Sunday to the last supper, to Jesus’ crucifixion, death, burial, and today, finally, his resurrection. We’ve made this mental journey ourselves, but we forget that many were a part of these last hours of Jesus, including his beloved female disciples.

As we begin our story here in John 20, Mary is at her lowest point. I would like to think that she’s probably not been this “low” since before the demons were cast out of her. We read in the text that she reaches the tomb before it’s even light out. She’s up early, and the first thing she does is go to his tomb. The other

Gospels have women accompanying Mary, but John has her going alone. It's stated other places that she is possibly going there to finish the work of embalming the body as was Jewish custom. The Gospels don't agree on whether the act of anointing before burial was completed. Whether she was going to grieve privately, corporately, or finish the work of body preparation that was started, Jesus' death is what's on Mary's mind. This probably wasn't safe, it was still dark out and Roman soldiers had been guarding the tomb. Certainly being present at the mob that was the crucifixion wasn't safe. But we know that Mary's devotion shows that her own personal safety, comfort, and prosperity mean little when it comes to being a follower of Jesus. She freely supports the disciples of her own purse, she lingers at the cross, she goes out in the early morning by herself to see to Jesus.

She then sees that clearly an act of vandalism has occurred. The stone is rolled away, and there is no one inside. Mary runs and tells Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple. John's gospel is pretty clear that they go and take a look, at least one of them "believes," although we don't know exactly what he believed, as it also said that it did not yet dawn on them that this might be a resurrection situation. And on a side note, why should it? Jesus was dead, they saw it happen. No miracle occurred, no miraculous saving took place, although I'm sure they were expecting something amazing to happen that would spare Jesus an agonizing and humiliating death. So they see, one believes, and what do they do? They go back to where they were staying. Jesus was gone, clearly they were at the scene of a robbery, and then they go home. I scratch my head at this behavior, but I often scratch my head at the decisions men make in the Bible.

Mary's behavior is what makes sense to me. It seems to be the next logical step forward in having a loved one taken away, both in spirit and in body. She cries. She cries at the tomb. She's confused, she's grieving, she probably doesn't know what to do because she has no idea who might have taken the body. It's all over. She lost Jesus, she watched the events of the past few days, and now, on top of everything, she has no place to go to remember him and his life. She can't finish the work of properly anointing Jesus as the king that he was to so many. He's just gone. And she is destitute.

She bends down to look in the tomb. Maybe it's to check if he's really gone, or it's just something she's habitually doing in her grief. But she sees 2 angels. They ask her why she's crying. Maybe Mary is used to seeing angels, or maybe she thinks that in her grief she's imagining all of this. She tells them that they have taken her Lord away, not Jesus, but her Lord, and she doesn't know where his body is right now. She needs to know. The only thing that's going to make this terrible situation a bit more bearable is if she at least knows where he is. She turns around, and Jesus has appeared.

But she has no idea. And this is where I'm confused again. I don't know if the resurrected Jesus looks radically different from the Jesus that Mary knew, or maybe it's the clothing he's wearing, or maybe her grief really was messing with her mind, but she thinks that Jesus is the gardener. It doesn't help that he calls her "woman." He didn't use her name, which I'll talk about in a minute. This indicates to her that this is someone she doesn't know. So this man must be the gardener. Clearly someone who works around here must know something, he probably moved the body, so she asks him where he has put Jesus. She's not even angry about it. She doesn't demand that this grounds keeper return him, she asks where he's put him and, no worries, she would go and get him.

Then he speaks her name. He calls her "Mary." And this, I believe, this the heart of the whole Easter story. Mary suddenly realizes that this isn't the gardener, this is Jesus, the one with whom she has been associated since that day she had the demons cast out of her, the man that helped her be rid of that trauma, the one with whom she traveled, spoke, and laughed, the one she saw die on the cross, the one whom she grieved over...was now saying her name in that familiar way that she thought she would never hear again.

Saying someone's name is powerful. When someone says our name, we pay attention. We look up. It's personal. When someone remembers our name, we smile. We associate personalities with our names, and say that certain names fit someone's character or ways of being in the world. With the Black Lives Matter movement, saying names is paramount. When someone dies at the hands of police, or others who use violent force, they encourage us to "say their name."

This shows they're not just another statistic, or an "unknown" person, they were loved and cherished, so we say their name.

Mary was loved and cherished by Jesus. He knew that if he said her name, she would know exactly who he was. And in that moment she exclaims "Rabboni," or "teacher!" Jesus and Mary have this moment of connection. I think this is also extremely important to the Easter story. Women in the ancient world did not have this sort of "connection" with men. Men and women did not worship together, traveling together was likely scandalous, and men certainly did not "instruct" women. But here, we have a truly intimate look at Mary Magdalene's relationship with Jesus. The man to whom she was devoted, helped support, the man who changed her entire life, spoke her name and chose to appear to her.

Again, I see how this resurrection scene could have been done myriad different ways, ways more glorious, or done in much more grand a fashion. He could have really showed the Roman authorities who chose to put him to death. He could have appeared to one of the 12 mentioned disciples. But he chose to appear to Mary, a grieving woman who had been the last at the cross, and the first at the tomb.

After Jesus commissions her to tell the disciples, Mary then becomes the first lady of proclamation, testifying to the Risen Christ. She is a gospel bearer, bringing the "good news" to the disciples. I can't help but think this must have caused some discomfort. Why Mary? Hadn't the disciples been "good enough?" Some were just at the tomb, but as I said before, chose to go home. Would Jesus have appeared to them? Once again, Jesus was turning things upside down and on their head, both in terms of resurrection then appearing first to someone who had little to no standing in ancient Jewish culture. Who would believe a woman?

I don't presume to know the exact relationship Mary Magdalene had with the disciples. Given the extreme patriarchal culture of the day, I'm sure more than one disciple was put out over Jesus' relationship to women, particularly Mary who was mentioned so many times in the Gospel accounts. Mary is a very inconvenient woman. I also don't presume to know the strength or the fragility of the egos present among the disciples, but I do know it's human nature to ask

“why not me?” Also, the age old refrain from both men and women throughout time, “is what she’s saying true? Can we believe her?”

So what are women saying? We live in a culture, while still patriarchal, where many women choose to speak up and say a whole lot. Women are speaking up in academia, in media, in the arts, in the sciences, and yes, even the church. A lot of attention goes to the negative/sensational, when women speak up about violence or harassment. And this is so important, because so many times women are simply not believed. But what else are women saying? Are we just picking and choosing what we listen to? Because I also know women again and again are bringing us good news.

Women are proclaiming truth, if only we would listen. Women in the secular world are bringing good news. Women are winning more positions in public office, sharing their ideas for change and hope for the future. Women are bringing change in businesses, women are showing the world the importance of bringing an education to everyone. And in the church, at least, in many churches, women have expanded their roles and are preaching, teaching, doing theology, leading in many capacities that were once just simply not available to everyone. Women are doing the good work of intersectionality, combining what we know about race, gender, class, and sexual orientation and informing theology through that lens. Women are actively bringing good news to everyone, not just a certain section of society. Women are proclaiming. Women are testifying.

Back to our story of Mary, she has gone beyond telling the good news of Jesus. Up until now, the message has been the same; Jesus is the son of God, Jesus has performed miracles and has taught and brought the news of salvation to many. But now, something is different. Jesus has triumphed over death. Death, the great unknown and the seeming end of all things, is no longer the final word. Death has literally been conquered through Jesus’ resurrection. Given what we know of death, and dying, and the grief and the pain associated with it, Jesus’ resurrection is more than just good news. This is pure hope.

So within Mary’s testimony, we find the miraculous, the hopeful, the scandalous, and the triumphant. The miracle of being raised from the dead, the hope that this

instills in us, the scandal of having the good news come from an unlikely source and the triumph of death no longer being the final, great unknown. All this comes from Mary herself, a woman who knows all these things to be true, a woman who never left Jesus, who was, indeed, the last at the cross and the first at the tomb.

We know this story. If you've grown up in the church, you've heard it many times before. But I encourage us to be on the lookout for Mary Magdalenes this Easter. With Jesus, the good news is always coming from an unlikely place. Who is proclaiming the good news of Jesus today, in our midst? Who is stretching us and opening us to hearing the good news we've internalized in new ways? What is making us uncomfortable, causing us to take a look at ourselves and our assumptions as to what is holy and what is not? Who is speaking into this wild hope, and are we listening?

In the spirit of the celebration of Mary Magdalene, who was amazed at the sight of her Lord, we break bread together. We remember Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in our celebratory taking of the bread and the cup. We do this together, as a group of Jesus followers who believe Mary. Who know Mary's testimony as nothing short of a miracle. And we, like Mary, are proclaiming the risen Christ.